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ABSTRACT

An alternative approach used in a third semester French course at the University of Colorado at Denver is described. The approach was adopted to improve student motivation. The course focuses on the learning of practical French for everyday situations, while traveling abroad for business or pleasure. Emphasis is on conversational, communicative skills and polite language use. Students learn to compose a letter, send a fax, prepare a curriculum vitae, and write a successful cover letter. Grammar is systematically and progressively reviewed, especially structures essential to practical communication, and some key elements of syntax are reinforced. The cultural component addresses primarily issues related to conducting business in a French-speaking country. Culture is taught through lecture with question-and-answer period, introduction to francophone cultures other than France, and use of authentic print materials. Oral dialogues, weekly written compositions, oral presentations, and supplementary readings are also used. (MSE)

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THIRD SEMESTER COLLEGE FRENCH, A DIFFERENT APPROACH: PRACTICAL FRENCH FOR CAREERS

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Third Semester College French, A Different Approach: Practical French for Careers

A third semester course is difficult to teach in any language. At the University of Colorado at Denver it is the last course of the language requirement. Therefore, most students who are not French majors are anxious "to get done with it." It is, also, a course that is required for French majors and minors. Because of this situation, the students' abilities and motivation are extremely varied.

Our regular course is traditional. It is essentially a grammar review of the main points covered during first year, an introduction to literature and culture, and an opportunity for students to practice their oral skills in small groups. To teach the course we have tried different books; none of them proved to be perfect (there always was something lacking!). Our present book, Montage, is very serviceable, but does not seem to encourage too many students to pursue a degree in French unless they had already decided to do so.

One question often asked by disgruntled students is: why do I have to study three semesters of French? I do not want to teach

French. What's the use of it? That is precisely to answer that question that we have introduced a course entitled "Practical French for Careers." This course is presently being taught at CU-Denver, and the results are encouraging, despite the fact that it has not attracted as many students as we had hoped for. With better publicity the situation should be remedied.

As the title of the course implies, practical French is emphasized in a variety of every day situations, designed to help a person deal with the special problems one faces when traveling abroad whether for business or pleasure: for example, how to make a phone call, reserve a room, buy a railroad ticket, use the metro, order a meal in a restaurant, etc. This is done through small conversations which students have to listen to and practice, and which they can use to improvise new conversations in slightly modified contexts. To make sure students know key responses to common questions, it is very important to use these model dialogues as often as possible. Conversational French is emphasized, rather than the super correct French of textbooks:

ça fait combien?
vous allez où?
vous êtes venu avec qui?

But no slang is used, since it is something students do not need to be taught anyway, and always manage to learn very fast, too fast in my opinion. Both the "tu" and "vous" forms are used; however, students learn to use "vous" until they know for sure that "tu" is o.k. Of course, correct pronunciation is essential, and systematic exercises covering difficult sounds in French are included in every chapter.

To make sure students get as much practice as possible, role playing is the technique preferred in class, and this is carefully controlled. For example, students are paired together, and a flash card given to each one; the cards contain key words to force students to elicit correct questions and answers (example). If students are supposed to talk on the telephone, they are asked to position themselves back to back to simulate a typical situation, without body language interference.

From what has just been described, it is clear that the communicative approach, that of language in a situation, is the preferred approach in this course. The main objective is to train the student to react in French to common situations, and to provide the know-how to do it properly. This goal applies to oral as well as written French. Students learn how to compose a business letter, send a fax, prepare their C.V., write a success-

ful cover letter, etc. - all of this with the minimum amount of French at their disposal. We consider that the active participation of students is essential; therefore, we devote about half of our alloted class time to it (the course is a three credit course, so one and a half hours are spent on this activity every week for fifteen weeks).

Besides the dialogues and various exercises accompanying them, grammar is also systematically and progressively reviewed, especially structures essential to the communicative approach on a practical level. Although grammar is not the focus of the course, some key elements of syntax are constantly being reinforced, such as the present, future and passé composé. Other tenses are introduced for global comprehension only, with the exception of the conditional which is widely used in business (ex. auriez-vous la bonté..., voudriez-vous... etc.). About thirty minutes are spent every week on the review and practice of grammatical points.

The third element we deal with in the course is culture. Although culture is an integral part of the language learning process, we are particularly interested in those aspects related to conducting business in a French speaking country. The means used to teach culture are varied:

1. Sometimes we will lecture in French on the topic presented in class. These lectures are rather short, and followed by a period of questions and answers. Further discussion is encouraged; if the topic is particularly interesting, students will ask all kinds of questions; of course, this is strongly recommended. During this exercise, comprehension and oral expression are emphasized; grammatical errors are ignored as long as they do not impair the on-going discussion. However, if it becomes necessary for the sake of clarity to explain a particular grammar point, it is done, but very rapidly in order not to break the momentum. (examples: meals, etc.)

2. Another means to sensitize students to different cultures is to introduce them to the francophone world in general. Students have to be told that French is not only the language of the Hexagon, but a language spoken in many parts of the world. It is also a diplomatic language, and because of Nafta and Gatt it is widely used in business transactions. But we should not forget the intense emotional appeal of the French language and anything French. Besides being the language of love, French is spoken in exotic places like Tahiti, Martinique, and Guadeloupe... and when some students can only think about skiing in January, others might very well turn their thoughts to hot sun and beaches, palm

trees and ti punch... What a great way to get them hooked on French!

3. Finally, every week students are given the opportunity to read authentic materials from current newspapers and magazines. Since this new course is a first step towards a series of French for business courses, the selections chosen deal mainly with aspects related to business and economics (from L'Expansion, France-Amérique, Le Journal français d'Amérique, L'Express, and anything else I can find of interest). My students enjoy reading something challenging; however, I do not expect them to understand everything perfectly well; I want them to get the gist of the article, and be able to answer a few well chosen questions. If the selection works well, we spend some time on it; if not, we move to something else. My philosophy is that students learn much better what they are interested in.

As far as homework is concerned, students have to prepare the dialogues very carefully by listening to the tapes, and getting ready to do the exercises. Every week they have to hand in a written composition, except when a major exam is scheduled (there are three of those in the semester). Besides this regularly scheduled work, I like to add extra assignments every now and then: dialogues to prepare, short compositions, short oral pre-

sentations, supplementary readings, etc. However, I deplore the fact there is never enough time to do all the things I'd like to do, especially as far as culture is concerned.

Obviously, the course is very practical in nature. Students realize they can actually communicate in French on a basic level, but coherently. As an added incentive to students we are looking into the possibility of developing internships in France during the summer. We already have several possibilities.

We hope that this approach to the teaching of French will enhance our program by providing an alternative to the traditional academic curriculum. In Denver, we have to compete with Spanish, and we would like very much to stop the exodus of students who flock to Spanish courses because they think Spanish is so much easier than French. We have to get them hooked on the beauty and practicality of the French language. In a word we have to make French very seductive.